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ABSTRACT

The multicultural perceptions and attitudinal shifts, if any, during student teaching of selected social studies student teachers at Mississippi State University were studied through a case study methodology that used observations, interviews, and document analyses, including scores on the Mississippi Teacher Assessment Instrument. The three student teachers from a class with the lowest scores on the Multicultural Perceptions Inventory and the three with the highest scores were selected. Perceptions and attitudes were assessed throughout the semester for these students and seven supervising teachers. Five of the six student teachers did not demonstrate the knowledge and skills deemed necessary according to the literature to provide the opportunity for the successful academic performance of culturally diverse students. Four of the six had positive attitudes toward culturally diverse students, but only one had the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to be successful in teaching culturally diverse students. Only one of the supervising teachers scored high enough on the teacher assessment instrument to indicate an attitude favoring student strategies that are student-centered, individualized, and flexible. Most of the student teachers in this sample did not experience cognitive dissonance with culturally diverse students in the classroom and did not change their attitudes as a result. Student teachers need opportunities to experience student-centered teaching strategies as well as teacher-centered strategies. (Contains 23 references.) (SLD)

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AN INVESTIGATION OF THE MULTICULTURAL  
PERCEPTIONS OF SELECTED SECONDARY  
SOCIAL STUDIES STUDENT TEACHERS

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An Investigation of the Multicultural Perceptions  
of Selected Secondary Social Studies Student Teachers

**Introduction**

According to Steve Benjamin (1985), 20 to 30 years ago teachers were not concerned with individual differences among students in the classroom, and addressing cultural diversity was not encouraged. It was not uncommon for teachers to hold the following beliefs:

So what if Mario cannot speak English as well as the other students? If he wants to be an American, he has to learn English! No matter that some children in my class are Jewish, Moslem, and Buddhist, Christianity is America's religion! We will read the Bible and pray regardless of their beliefs and complaints. No matter that Native American students in my class might have another view concerning Columbus day! We will continue to celebrate the 'true' founding of this great nation. (Benjamin, 1985, p. 80)

Benjamin wrote in his article that teachers formerly were "authoritarian in style, paying little attention to individual needs of ethnically and culturally diverse students" (p. 80). However, Benjamin believes that contemporary teachers do "recognize an obligation to respond to students' individual needs" (p. 80).

The role of the teacher has changed, and one of the main duties of a teacher today is to "foster understanding and good will among all the peoples of the world, and to attempt through instruction to alleviate the fears, ignorance and prejudice of our students" (Benjamin, p. 81). In order for teachers to foster

positive attitudes concerning diversity among their students, the teachers themselves must have positive attitudes toward all students, regardless of their individual backgrounds and experiences.

Teachers should be aware that an ethnocentric attitude leads to a judgement of others according to individual cultural norms. And, according to Pai (1984), teachers may be inclined to conclude that those who do not conform to their norms "must be stupid, depraved, irresponsible, psychopathic, inferior, or sinful to a point beyond all redemption" (p. 7). When students enter an educational environment or classroom that does not value their individual backgrounds and differences, they may be forced to reject their own cultures which could lead to decreased motivation and poor academic performance (Dean, 1989).

Because of the changing nature of public school demographics, i.e., more students from culturally diverse backgrounds and fewer teachers who share similar backgrounds with their students, and the lack of cultural sensitivity and awareness on the part of many preservice teachers, teacher education programs must present teachers with the opportunity to become more knowledgeable of the cultural diversity among those they will be teaching. According to Guild (1994), it is essential for teachers to know each student's culture in order to enhance the potential for learning to take place for every student.

Research suggests that most teacher education programs do not prepare their students to work with culturally diverse

students. In order for preservice teachers to develop positive attitudes about other cultures, they need student teaching placements in culturally diverse settings and a cultural knowledge base. Therefore, teacher education programs must provide preservice teachers with the opportunity to change their perceptions and beliefs that may be detrimental to the success of all students in the classroom and place them with supervising teachers during the student teaching experience who implement a variety of teaching strategies to meet the needs of all students.

### **Methods and Procedures**

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the multicultural perceptions and attitudinal shifts, if any, during student teaching of selected social studies student teachers at Mississippi State University. By identifying how preservice teachers are prepared for the diversity in the classroom, educators may find ways to improve their instruction.

The research design for this study was case study, using observations, interviews, and document analyses. The interpretive case study was used to support the theoretical framework based on Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). To make sure that the knowledge contributed by this study was trustworthy, validity and reliability were accounted for by using multiple sources of evidence, repeated observations of the same setting, peer examination, a chain of evidence, and a case study protocol.

The six subjects in this study were selected purposefully from the social studies student teachers at the beginning of their student teaching experience. Students participating in the study were selected from the 15 social studies student teachers in the Spring of 1996. All 15 completed the Multicultural Perceptions Inventory (MPI), (Nahlen-Many, 1994). The three students with the lowest scores and the three students with the highest scores were chosen for the case studies.

The researcher served as the university supervisor for the student teachers in the study. The researcher observed each student six times over the course of the semester. The first visit served as an introductory visit, allowing the researcher to meet the supervising teacher, principal, and students, and become familiar with the school environment. The following four visits were used to observe and evaluate the student teachers, using the Mississippi Teacher Assessment Instrument (MTAI), (College of Education, Mississippi State University, 1996). The last visit for all student teachers served as a final evaluation and provided the researcher the chance to interview the supervising teacher and administer A Teacher Attitude Inventory (TAI), (Whitmore, 1974), administer the MPI again and interview the student teacher.

Case studies were conducted on each student teacher in an attempt to answer the following research questions: (a) Do the selected student teachers in the study have the necessary attitudes, knowledge, and skills to become successful in teaching

culturally diverse students as indicated by their multicultural perceptions and evaluation of their teaching skills as measured by the MTAI? and (b) Do attitudinal shifts occur in the selected student teachers' multicultural perceptions during the student teaching experience as measured by their level of cultural sensitivity before and after student teaching, and by their supervising teachers' attitude toward teaching?

#### **Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

Five of the six student teachers in this study did not demonstrate the knowledge and skills, deemed necessary according to the literature, to provide the opportunity for the successful academic performance of culturally diverse students based on their MPI scores, MTAI evaluations, classroom observations, and interviews. Four of the six student teachers had positive attitudes toward culturally diverse students based on the MPI scores, MTAI evaluations, classroom observations, and interviews. One student teacher had the attitude, knowledge, and skills to be successful in teaching culturally diverse students.

Only one supervising teacher scored high enough on the TAI to indicate an attitude favoring teaching strategies that are student-centered, individualized, and flexible. The other seven teachers scored low on the TAI, thereby indicating an attitude that is predominantly teacher-centered. Their scores reflected a teacher who prefers the traditional methods of teaching, such as lecture, mastery of subject matter, and large group instruction.

Based on the findings of this study, i.e., 83% of the student teachers failed to demonstrate appropriate knowledge and skills revealed in the related literature review needed for the successful teaching of culturally diverse students, it would appear that preservice teachers need more opportunities in their teacher education program to develop a theoretical and philosophical framework of cultural diversity and multiculturalism. The findings were confirmed by the review of related literature reported by Burstein and Cabello (1989), McCall (1995), Nel (1992), and Sleeter and Grant (1986). According to these researchers, when teachers do not know and appreciate the backgrounds and experiences of culturally diverse students, the teachers may have a negative impact on the performance of those students. When teachers are not familiar with culturally diverse students' needs, they make it more difficult for culturally diverse students to learn (Gilbert & Gay, 1985; Sleeter & Grant, 1986). Preservice teachers should also be provided an opportunity to learn a variety of instructional strategies with multicultural education components prior to the student teaching experience. According to Grant (1994), the courses that preservice teachers currently take do not prepare them to work with culturally diverse students. Pine and Hilliard (1990) characterize effective instruction for culturally diverse students as high expectations; successful motivation and communication; and cooperative learning and interracial groups.

Since 88% of the supervising teachers indicated on the TAI that they prefer to use teacher-centered rather than student-centered instructional strategies in the classroom, it would appear that more staff development programs and activities that are designed to assist them in working more effectively with student teachers should be provided. The supervising teacher has a strong influence on the student teacher (Bain, 1993; Grant & Koskela, 1986; Morin, 1993). As revealed in the related literature review, supervising teachers do not address issues related to cultural diversity when working with student teachers (Collins, 1993); therefore, the student teachers fail to address issues related to cultural diversity (Grant & Koskela, 1986). According to Grant (1994), student teachers benefit from being placed with teachers familiar with cultural diversity and strategies which support individual learning styles.

This research was undertaken with the expectations that the student teachers would experience dissonance in the classroom and change their attitudes toward culturally diverse students. Not having interacted with students culturally different from them, the researcher was expecting the subjects to experience dissonance in the classroom, which would cause them to change their attitudes after working with culturally diverse students. This was not the case with these six subjects. Only one student teacher experienced dissonance during the student teaching experience and reduced it by changing his attitude. While the majority of the student teachers scored higher on the MPI

posttest than the pretest, the change in score was not statistically significant in these cases.

The majority of the student teachers in this study did not experience dissonance in the classroom and therefore, did not experience an attitude change toward culturally diverse students. Four of the student teachers did not experience dissonance in the classroom because they did not have the knowledge and skills to change any previously held attitudes about culturally diverse students, they did not work with supervising teachers who encouraged them to use teaching strategies to account for individual learning styles, and they did not work with culturally diverse students. One of the student teachers did not experience dissonance because she had the knowledge and skills to be successful in teaching culturally diverse students. She also had a supervising teacher who practiced strategies for the successful performance of culturally diverse students. The only student teacher who experienced dissonance and an attitude change during student teaching experienced dissonance because he worked with culturally diverse students whom he had previous negative attitudes about based on stereotypes.

Although cognitive dissonance was found to occur in only one of the six students participating in this study, it would appear that cognitive dissonance is an important concept to be studied in educational research among preservice teachers. It should be noted that the student teachers selected to participate in this study were selected purposefully based upon their pretest scores

on the MPI. The three students with the highest scores and the three students with the lowest scores were the focus of the study. The three students with the lowest scores did not score low enough on the MPI pretest to indicate negative attitudes toward culturally diverse students. Their scores were in the middle of the range, which indicated that they did not have positive or negative attitudes toward culturally diverse students. Based on the MPI posttest score and the interview, one of the three students with the lowest MPI pretest scores experienced cognitive dissonance and an attitudinal shift concerning his multicultural perceptions (knowledge and attitude).

According to Pajares (1992), what teachers believe about their work, students, subject matter, roles, and responsibility influence their actions in the classroom. Related research studies reported by Bennett and Harris (1982) and Grant (1985) concluded that the perceptions and beliefs teachers have about diverse student populations determine how teachers interact with such students in the classroom. According to McCaleb (1979), student teachers may encounter dissonance in the classroom because their supervising teachers are not using a variety of innovative strategies. If student teachers are taught to use a variety of instructional strategies, but they experience traditional practices being taught in the classroom, the student teacher will experience dissonance. Based on the findings of this study and review of related literature, it would appear that

student teachers should be matched with supervising teachers who demonstrate positive attitudes toward working with culturally diverse students, knowledge of cultural diversity and multicultural education, expertise in instructional methodology and classroom management, and proven success in working with culturally diverse students. Stated differently, student teachers need opportunities to experience student-centered teaching strategies as well as teacher-centered strategies under competent supervision.

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